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ABSTRACT

This study describes the graduate assistants' (GA) responsibility at Northern Michigan University, assesses their work load and working conditions, and provides a means whereby the assistants could make suggestions for improving the assistantship program. Data was obtained from 59 of the 60 GA's who completed a questionnaire distributed in February 1970. Information is presented on: (1) GA's by departments and sex; (2) origin of bachelor's degree; (3) age; (4) year bachelor's degree was earned; (5) distribution of GA's by years of prior full-time work experience; (6) their sources of funds in addition to the assistantship; (7) numbers of credit carried Fall and Spring semesters; (8) anticipated employment following graduation; (9) distribution of GA's by hours devoted per week to assistantship duties; (10) distribution of GA's by hours of work and study per week; (11) assistance received with teaching responsibilities; (12) satisfaction with supervision of non-teaching responsibilities; (13) benefits and disadvantages of the GA; and (14) suggestions to improve the program. The questionnaire is included in the appendix. (AF)

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Northern Michigan University
Office of Institutional Research

Graduate Assistant Survey
Northern Michigan University 1969-70

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Office of Institutional Research
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June 1970

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Graduate Assistant Survey

The study reported here was undertaken at the recommendation of the Graduate Committee of Northern Michigan University. Its major objectives were to describe the graduate assistants' responsibilities, assess their work load and working conditions, and provide a means whereby the assistants could make suggestions for improving the assistantship program. All data were obtained by a mailed questionnaire distributed in February, 1970, to all graduate assistants at Northern Michigan University, 60 in all. Fifty-nine usable questionnaires were returned; the only nonrespondent was an assistant who left the University soon after the questionnaire was mailed.

Two previous studies provided useful guidelines in development of the survey instrument. Both of the studies covered not only graduate assistants, but also regularly enrolled graduate students. These studies were both conducted at institutions granting the Ph. D. degree (Michigan State University and The University of Cincinnati) and therefore, included a number of research oriented questions which were not applicable to Northern Michigan University.

Results of the Survey

The distribution of respondents is shown by sex and department in Table 1. As can be seen from that table, 32 of the respondents were men and 27 were women. An almost equal distribution between married and single assistants was found: 29 married-30 single. Forty-five of the assistants were United States citizens. Fifty of the assistants were in the first year of their assistantship and nine in their second year. Of the fifty in their first year, 23 planned to continue for a second year.

From Table 2, it may be noted that more than half the assistants (34) received their Bachelor's degree from Northern Michigan University. About 18% received their Bachelor's degree outside Michigan and about 18% from schools outside the United States. Only three assistants got their Bachelor's degree from other schools in Michigan.

From Table 3, it can be seen that a little over half the assistants (35) were between the ages of 20-25. Since many of them were quite young, most of the assistants had received their Bachelor's degree in 1969 or 1970, as shown by Table 4.

Table 5, which details previous full-time work experience, shows that only 13 of the assistants had had prior full-time teaching experience. This is consistent with the already noted finding that almost two-thirds of them had received their Bachelor's degree the previous year. More than one-third of the assistants (23) had had no previous full-time work experience, but about 20% (12) had five or more years of combined teaching and other work experience.

Table 6 shows that 47 of the 59 assistants needed financial help in addition to the salary received from the assistantship. The single largest source of help was a husband or wife who worked to help support the family. Only eight of the 29 assistants who were married did not indicate that their spouse was employed.

From the number of credits carried by the assistants (Table 7), it is apparent that most took only two courses during the fall and spring semesters; as noted later in this report, this was commented upon by a number of the assistants. Seventeen assistants, both fall and spring, took three courses which is, according to the Graduate Bulletin of the University, one course more than is normally recommended. Also, one assistant was enrolled for four courses in the fall semester.

Table 8 shows the assistants' anticipated employment after the Master's degree

is obtained. The three areas dealing primarily with continued work in education, as might be expected, received the largest number of responses. One area "Don't Know" or other than listed got the second highest number of responses (23%), indicating that some assistants were still uncertain as to their future plans.

The average number of hours devoted per week to work and study is summarized in Tables 9 and 10. All but ten of the assistants reported that they actively engaged in teaching and 29 indicated that they spent some time in assisting other faculty to grade papers, administer and correct tests, etc. A relatively small number (about one-fourth) reported that they advised undergraduate students, and about 30% reported devoting some time to research activities.

It seems evident from Table 9 that there was substantial variability in the number of hours which assistants devoted to work responsibilities. A few assistants reported that more than 30 hours per week were devoted to their assistantship, whereas a small number reported an average of ten hours or less per week. Similarly, the total work week, Table 10 (assistantship plus study) varied greatly even if one assumes some error in reporting; it appears that some assistants put in a total work week of 60 hours or more, whereas a few others spent 20 hours or less in work and study. On the average, however, the assistants devoted 20 hours per week to work and 23 to study for a total of 43 hours exclusive of class time.

Assistants who were teaching were asked to indicate the extent of assistance received from a full-time faculty member; their responses are shown in Table 11. About 16% of the 49 assistants who were teaching indicated that they received little or not assistance, 65% said that an instructor was available when needed and 18% that substantial assistance was received (every or almost every class period).

The assistants were also asked to evaluate the supervision received on non-

teaching responsibilities (Table 12). Two assistants felt that they were supervised too closely, 38 responded that they received about the right amount of supervision and one indicated that no supervision was received, but that some was needed. The remaining 18 assistants had no non-teaching responsibilities.

Since graduate assistants at some institutions have inadequate office space, the assistants were asked to evaluate the adequacy of their office space at Northern. Most, 86%, indicated that they had adequate office facilities.

Tables 13 through 15 are summaries of responses to open ended questions designed to elicit from the assistants their feelings about the strengths and weaknesses of the graduate assistantship program at Northern and what, if anything, they might recommend in the way of changes.

As might be expected, financial help was the most often mentioned benefit of an assistantship. The chance to teach was cited as the next most important benefit, followed by the exposure to new learning experiences. The opportunity to become familiar with University operations and to interact with faculty and staff were also mentioned as significant benefits.

Very few of the assistants, as Table 14 shows, found any great problems with the graduate assistantship program. Twelve mentioned limited social interaction and study time. Following this in frequency of mention was the restriction placed on the number of credit hours a graduate assistant could take. As noted earlier, almost one-third of the graduate assistants took more than the eight credit limit. This situation probably needs study, since the eight credit limit seems not to be followed in practice. Another disadvantage cited by nine of the assistants, was where they stand in relation to the faculty and student body. Some felt that they were in a grey limbo area between the two and with no base to which they can or possibly should be tied.

A fairly wide range of suggestions were made for improving the assistantship program. Although an attempt was made to combine the suggestions, as can be seen from Table 15, there were a rather large number of unrelated ideas expressed.

Summary and Conclusions

To summarize, more men than women were hired as graduate assistants, most were young (between 21 and 25) and most had received their Bachelor's degree from Northern either in 1969 or 1970. Since most of the assistants were quite young, very few of them had previous teaching experience, although almost half of them had some previous full-time non-teaching work experience.

A large number of assistants needed more financial help to get through school than was offered by the salary attached to the assistantship alone. This help was most often obtained from an employed spouse. A substantial number of assistants took more than the recommended number of credit hours each semester; several were critical of the eight hour restriction. Perhaps the restriction should be more consistently enforced or removed from the Graduate Bulletin.

As could be expected most of the assistants anticipated employment in education after receiving the M.A. degree. A number of them, however, were undecided about employment following graduation.

In amount of time devoted to the assistantship and hours of study per week, a wide variance was found between assistants. Some assistants spent over 60 hours a week in study and work, while others spent less than 20 hours. Insofar as time devoted to the assistantship was concerned, a few students spent 10 hours or less per week and a few 30 hours or more, although the average was about 20 hours. The average for both study and work time was about 43 hours.

Most of the teaching assistants felt that there was someone around if they needed assistance during class periods. The reaction of most assistants to the extent of supervision of non-teaching responsibilities was that it was about right. One assistant felt that supervision was needed but that none was received.

The most often mentioned benefit of an assistantship was the financial reward. Many assistants mentioned that without it they could not have continued their education. Another benefit mentioned by a number of assistants was the opportunity it provided them to actually teach a university class. The most frequently mentioned disadvantages were the lack of study time and opportunity for social interaction. From a number of comments made by the assistants there seems a need for better communication between the assistants and their departments to more clearly spell out their duties and the benefits of an assistantship. This could help reduce the feeling mentioned by a number of assistants of being in limbo.

Finally, a general overall view would be that most graduate assistants were well satisfied with their work load, study time, and general conditions of employment at Northern Michigan University.

Table 1. Graduate Assistants by Department and Sex.

<u>Department</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Total</u>
Biology	7	5	12
Chemistry	4	3	7
English	2	3	5
Foreign Language	1	0	1
Geography	1	0	1
History	3	1	4
Mathematics	1	2	3
Music	0	1	1
Speech	1	4	5
Education	1	4	5
Physical Education	4	1	5
Home Economics	0	1	1
Industrial Education	5	0	5
Business Education	1	2	3
Institutional Research	<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>
Total	32	27	59

Table 2. Origin of Bachelor's Degree.

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Northern Michigan University	34	59
Other in Michigan	3	5
Out of Michigan	11	18
Foreign	<u>11</u>	<u>18</u>
	59	100

Table 3. Graduate Assistants by Age.

<u>Age</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
41+	6	10
31-40	7	12
26-30	11	18
20-25	<u>35</u>	<u>59</u>
	59	100

Table 4. Year that Bachelor's Degree was Earned.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
1965 or earlier	6	10
1966	4	7
1967	8	14
1968	5	8
1969	33	56
1970	<u>3</u>	<u>5</u>
	59	100

Table 5. Distribution of Graduate Assistants by Years of Prior Full-Time Work Experience.

<u>Years</u>	<u>Teaching</u>		<u>Other</u>		<u>Total</u>	
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
5 or more	3	5	10	17	12	20
4	1	2	3	5	4	7
3	1	2	7	12	10	17
2	5	8	4	7	8	14
1	3	5	3	5	2	3
None	<u>46</u>	<u>78</u>	<u>32</u>	<u>54</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>39</u>
	59	100	59	100	59	100

Table 6. Sources of Funds in Addition to Assistantship.

<u>Source</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage*</u>
Spouse Works	21	36
Other Jobs	12	20
Loan Funds	7	12
Parents	7	12
Other Sources	10	17

* Percent of 59 graduate assistants who reported each source

Table 7. Credits Carried.

<u>Credit Hours</u>	<u>Fall</u>		<u>Spring</u>	
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
13-16	1	2	0	0
9-12	17	29	17	29
5-8	32	54	38	64
0-4	9	15	4	7
	59	100	59	100

Table 8. Anticipated Employment after Graduation.

<u>Anticipated Employment</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Doctoral Studies	13	22
Elementary or Secondary School	20	34
University or College	10	17
Federal Government	1	2
Business or Industry	1	2
Other or Don't Know	14	23
	59	100

Table 9. Distribution of Graduate Assistants by Hours Devoted Per Week to Assistantship Duties.

<u>Hours</u>	<u>Teaching</u>		<u>Grading Papers</u>		<u>Advising</u>		<u>Research</u>		<u>Other</u>	
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
41 or more	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
31-40	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
21-30	8	14	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11-20	27	45	1	2	0	0	4	7	3	5
6-10	10	17	7	12	0	0	0	0	4	7
1-5	3	5	21	35	15	25	14	24	10	17
None	10	17	30	51	44	75	41	69	42	71
	59	100	59	100	59	100	59	100	59	100

Table 10. Distribution of Graduate Assistants by Hours of Work and Study Per Week.

<u>Hours</u>	<u>Assistantship</u>		<u>Study</u>		<u>Total</u>	
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Over 61	0	0	1	2	2	3
51-60	0	0	0	0	9	15
41-50	1	2	1	2	19	23
31-40	3	5	10	17	24	41
21-30	12	20	14	23	3	5
11-20	38	65	29	49	2	3
0-10	5	8	4	7	0	0
	59	100	59	100	59	100

Table 11. Assistance Received with Teaching Responsibilities.

<u>Extent of Supervision</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Substantial	9	18
Occasional	32	65
Infrequent or None	8	16

Table 12. Satisfaction with Supervision of Non-Teaching Responsibilities.

<u>Reaction to Supervision</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Supervised too closely	2	5
About right amount	38	93
No supervision, but some needed	1	2

Table 13. Benefits of a Graduate Assistantship.

<u>Benefit</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage*</u>
Financial help	38	64
Opportunity for teaching experience	24	41
Exposure to many learning experiences	20	34
Participation in the operations of a University	12	20
Opportunities to interact with faculty and staff	12	20
Special privileges such as: use of facilities when needed, parking, library	5	8
Opportunity for research experience	1	2

* Percent of assistants who mentioned benefit

Table 14. Disadvantages of a Graduate Assistantship.

<u>Disadvantage</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage *</u>
Study time and social interaction are limited	12	20
Cannot enroll for more than 8 credit hours	9	15
Hard to separate role as teacher and role as student	9	15
Financial assistance too small	6	10
Assistants are at the service of the department	6	10
Poor communications of job requirements	4	7

* Percent of assistants who mentioned disadvantage

Table 15. Suggestions to Improve Assistantship Program.

<u>Suggestion</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage*</u>
Better communication of assistantship work requirements and benefits	7	12
Allow attendance at faculty functions such as staff meetings, conferences, etc.	4	7
Reduce number of hours of work required and equalize among departments	4	7
Allow more teaching	4	7
Give student teaching or graduate credit for teaching	3	5
Offer more research assistantships	3	5
Establish graduate student association	3	5
Increase pay	3	5
A lounge where students and faculty can meet informally	1	2
Have separate living quarters on campus for graduate students	1	2
Establish summer assistantships	1	2
Lighten assistants academic load during regular school year and pay during summer for work performed during year	1	2
Eliminate evening classes, move them into regular class day	1	2
Allow assistants to have keys for their buildings	1	2

* Percent of assistants who mentioned suggestion

NORTHERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
Office of Institutional Research
Graduate Assistant Survey

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1-2 _____

3-4 _____

5 _____

6 _____

7 _____

8 _____

9-10 _____

11-12 _____

13-14 _____

15-16 _____

17 _____

18 _____

Department: _____

1. Age in Years: _____

2. Sex: M _____ F _____

3. Marital Status:
Married _____
Single _____
Other _____

4. Country of citizenship: U.S. _____ Other (specify) _____

5. Origin of Bachelor's Degree:
NMU _____
Other Michigan School (specify) _____
School outside of Michigan (specify) _____
School outside of U.S. (specify) _____

Year degree was received: _____

6. Prior full-time work experience (report only if 6 months or more)

<u>Type</u>	<u>Number of Years (nearest years)</u>
Teaching	_____
Non-teaching	_____
Total	_____

7. Status as a graduate assistant (check):
First year _____
Second year _____

If first year, do you plan to continue assistantship next
year? Yes _____ No _____

Do not
Write in This
Space

19 _____

8. Assistance with teaching responsibilities:

If you were teaching either fall or spring semesters, please check the statement which best describes the amount of assistance received from a full-time faculty member of your department. If you did not teach, check item 4.

1. Substantial assistance (every or almost every class period) _____
2. Occasional assistance (instructor available when needed) _____
3. Infrequent or no assistance _____
4. Had no teaching responsibility _____

20 _____

9. Check the statement which best describes your reaction to supervision of your non-teaching responsibilities.

1. Supervised more closely than I would like _____
2. Just about the right amount of supervision _____
3. Some supervision but less than I would like _____
4. No supervision but some needed _____
5. Have no non-teaching responsibilities _____

10. Estimate the average number of hours spent per week in the following activities as a part of your work load:

21-22 _____

23-24 _____

25-26 _____

27-28 _____

29-30 _____

<u>Activity</u>	<u>Hours per week</u>
1. Teaching including preparation for teaching (all work related to class you teach)	_____
2. Grading papers, giving and correcting tests, etc. for other faculty	_____
3. Research assistance (including library research)	_____
4. Advising undergraduate students	_____
5. Other (explain) _____	_____
Total	_____

11. Academic work load carried as a student:

Number of credit hours: Fall _____
Spring _____

Average number of hours spent in study per week _____

31-32 _____

33-34 _____

35-36 _____

37-38 _____

Do not
Write in This
Space

39 _____

40 _____

41 _____

42 _____

43 _____

44 _____

45 _____

46 _____

47 _____

12. Anticipated employment after completing graduate work (check one)

- Doctoral studies _____
Elementary or Secondary School _____
University or College _____
Federal Government _____
State or local Government _____
Business or Industry _____
Other (specify) _____
Not known _____

13. Source of funds other than assistantship (check all that apply)

1. Tutoring _____
2. Loan funds _____
3. Scholarships _____
4. Parents _____
5. Spouse works _____
6. Other jobs _____
7. Other source (explain) _____

14. Office space (check the appropriate statement)

1. Adequate _____
2. Inadequate _____
3. None _____
4. Other (explain) _____

15. Benefits of a Graduate Assistantship (briefly describe one or more ways in which an assistantship is of benefit to you.)

Do not
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16. Disadvantages of being a Graduate Assistant:

17. Suggestions for improving the assistantship program (e.g. changes in university policy, department procedures, working conditions and relationships, opportunities for professional growth, social life, etc.)